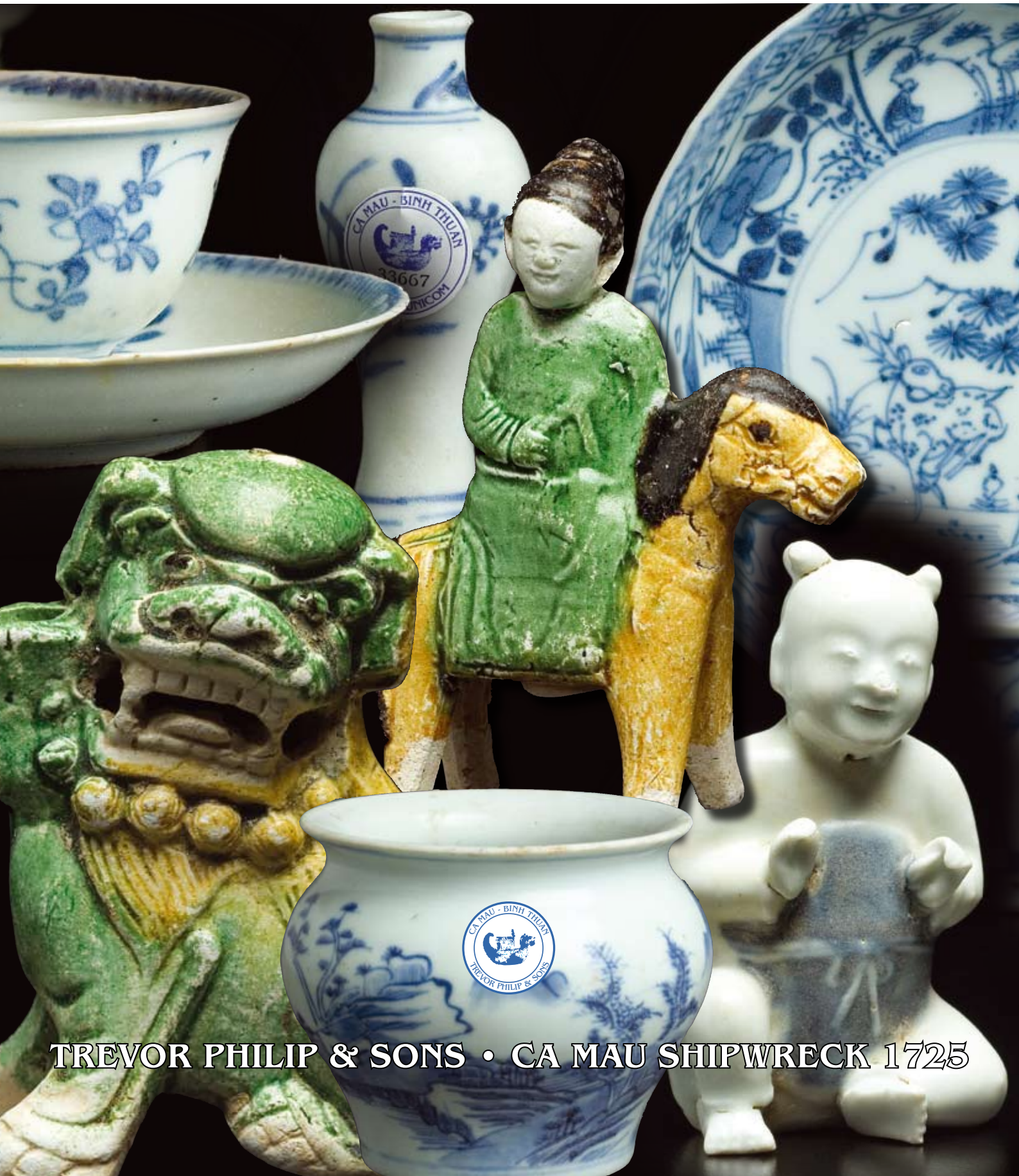
The Ca Mau Shipwreck

circa 1725



TREVOR PHILIP & SONS • CA MAU SHIPWRECK 1725

The Discovery of the Wreck

In June 1998, a Vietnamese newspaper reported of a shipwreck filled with 18th century Chinese porcelain. The wreck had been discovered by fishermen working off the coast of the Ca Mau peninsular on the southern most tip of Vietnam, as their nets had snagged the wreck. When they found the porcelain was saleable, they began the scramble to dredge up as much as possible. As soon as the news broke, the Government intervened and a team of conservators, divers and camera crew started to excavate the site. Some of the porcelain was damaged on impact and from the fishermen's dredging, but huge quantities had survived. In all, 130,000 pieces of porcelain were retrieved from the site.

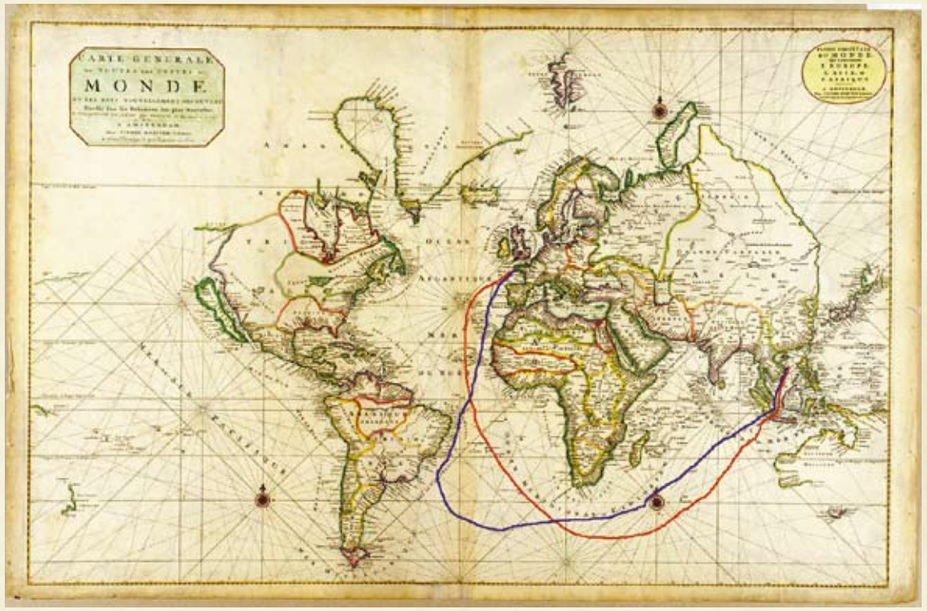
Left: A map showing (in red) the probable route intended for the voyage from Kuanzhou, then known to the Europeans as Canton, down the coast of Vietnam towards the Dutch trading port of Batavia, now Jakarta.

Of the 130,000 pieces of porcelain recovered. 76,000 were selected for sale. In 2006 the porcelain was packed for shipment, so after a delay of 280 years, this cargo could complete its journey to Europe.

The Date of the Wreck and the Porcelain

It was soon established that this was possibly a Chinese junk heading for the Dutch trading port of Batavia (present-day Jakarta) and the reason for its sinking an intense fire on board. From the shapes and designs of the porcelain it was clear that the main part of the cargo was made for the European market. Enormous quantities were exported to meet the huge demand after porcelain became fashionable in Europe in the early 18th century and were transported from southern China to Batavia by Chinese junks. In addition, all the artefacts found on board were Chinese, including stone seals and coins of the Kangxi period. All of the porcelain was made at Jingdezhen, for centuries the main centre of porcelain making in China and home to the Imperial kilns, and could be dated to the reign of Emperor Yongzheng (1723-1735). The dating of the porcelain could be further narrowed down to c.1725 by the presence of other pieces of porcelain very much in the same style known to have been made in the latter part of the reign of the Emperor Kangxi who had died in 1722.

The passion for tea and coffee drinking swept across Europe appealing to both high society and the middle classes. Here are shown two ladies and an officer drinking tea from Chinese blue and white porcelain. It was painted by Nicolaes Jansz Verkolje, c. 1715 to 1720. At this time in London, with a population of less than one million, there were over 1500 coffee houses and this enthusiasm was replicated across Europe.



A Dutch map of the world as it was known c. 1720, by Pierre Mortimer and printed on Mercator's projection in Amsterdam. The approximate route of the China Trade ships has been added. The outward route is marked in blue, and the return in red.

The Ca Mau and the Canton Junk Trade

Tea and coffee had become the rage throughout Europe. The demand was escalating fast, but the Chinese were reluctant to trade with the West in the early 18th century. Europeans were restricted to the port of Canton where the principal traders were The East India Company of London and the Dutch East India Company (VOC) of Amsterdam. The Dutch found it easier to deal with Chinese merchants and bringing their wares by junk to Batavia where it was shipped to either Islamic markets or to Europe.

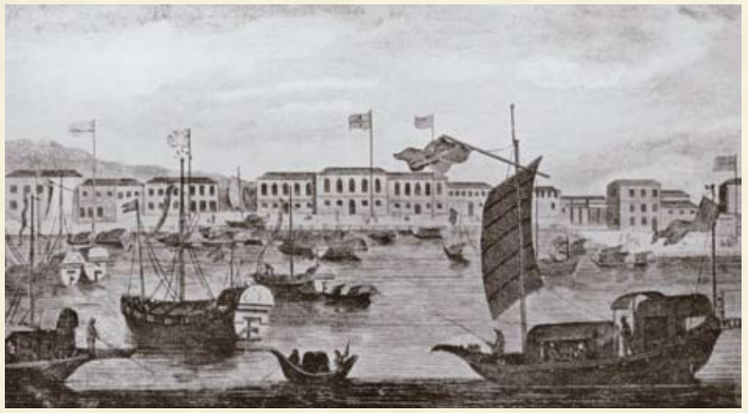
The East India Companies, with their need to satisfy the demand for tea, also had to have in mind that tea drinking demanded porcelain and so most of what they imported in these years was tea wares.

An assortment was first ordered through the Chinese merchants, who would then send the order to Jingdezhen, where hundreds of privately run workshops made and painted the porcelain. Once the manufacturing process was complete the porcelain was packed and began its 1000 kilometres journey to Canton, delivered to the merchant and loaded onto the junk for trans-shipment to Batavia.

Conclusion

Like every shipwreck, the Ca Mau should be regarded as a time capsule full of information, allowing maritime archaeologists and historians to reconstruct its historical context. The ship and its contents comprise a sealed entity, affected only by its long immersion in the sea. All objects recovered belonged together when the ship sank and if only one piece can be dated with certainty, the whole cargo can be dated.

The porcelain offered in this catalogue is tangible evidence of the 'Chinamania' that flourished in Britain, France and Holland in the early 18th century, and they are remarkable in their own right for their beauty and delicacy, and for the drama of the their recovery.



To keep a tight control on the European traders the only access to China was via the prot of Canton or Guangzhou. The Canton factories, shown here in a print c. 1730, were outside the city walls

'Fisherman and boats passing' pattern

Blue and white teabowls and saucers, circa 1725

With boats sailing close together as they pass an island from which a solitary figure is fishing, the rims with a herringbone border, the reverse glazed café-au-lait.

Diameter: teabowls 6.5cm, saucers 11cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.172, item no. 208

'Lotus and flowerhead' pattern

Blue and white teabowls and saucers, circa 1725

The bowls with a large lotus head within a diaper border, the saucers with the flowerhead encircled by flowering lotus and prunus plants, the exteriors of each piece covered with a café-au-lait glaze.

Diameter: teabowls 8.4cm, saucers 13.4cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.126, item no. 84

'Wild cherry pattern' pattern

Blue and white teabowls and saucers, circa 1725

Painted in a dark blue with a small flower medallion encircled by trailing wild cherry branches growing from two opposed bushes, the rims with a narrow herringbone border, the reverse with a café-au-lait glaze.

Diameter: teabowls 6.6cm, saucers 11cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.176, item no. 221

'Butterfly' pattern

Blue and white teabowls and saucers, circa 1725

Each piece with two large butterflies separated by flowering peony and chrysanthemum plants within narrow hatched border.

Diameter: teabowls 7.2cm, saucers 12cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.130, item no. 97/98

'Search for plum-blossom' pattern

Blue and white teabowls and saucers, circa 1725

Each piece with a scholar on horseback searching for plum blossom, an attendant walking behind with a plum branch in his hand.

Diameter: teabowls 7cm, saucers 11.5cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.139, item no. 123/124

'Passing boats and bridge II' pattern

Blue and white teabowls and saucers, circa 1725

With a medallion of two boats sailing together, passing an island on which a solitary figure stands by, or on a bridge, the rim with a blue washed floral border, the reverse glazed café-au-lait.

Diameter: teabowls 6.7cm, saucers 10.8cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.172, item no. 205

'Fisherman' pattern

Blue and white teabowls and saucers, circa 1725

With a lone fisherman at the water's edge, a sampan moored on the shore opposite, buildings in the background, the rim with a narrow hatched border.

Diameter: teabowls 6.3cm, saucers 10.8cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.172, item no. 208

'The fallow deer' pattern

Blue and white teabowls and saucers, circa 1725

The saucers with a spotted deer beneath a pine tree on a mountain path, a fungus at the edge of the path, the rim with a paralleled border of landscapes, willow and flowers, the bowls with the deer medallion in the interior.

Diameter: teabowls 7.8cm, saucers 12.8cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.116, item no. 54

'Boy on a buffalo' pattern

Blue and white teabowls and saucers, circa 1725

Each with a boy riding on the back of a buffalo, another close behind as they pass through a valley landscape, foothills of mountains in the distance.

Diameter: teabowls 7.3cm, saucers 11.7cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.167/170, item no. 191/200

'Bird and insect' pattern

Blue and white teabowls and saucers, circa 1725

With a central medallion of a bird watching the passing of an insect in an open garden, the rim of the saucer and the exterior of the teabowl with lappet panels of flowering landscapes.

Diameter: teabowls 7.2cm, saucers 12cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.129, item no. 93/94

Doll's house garniture

circa 1725

Of baluster and double gourd forms, simply painted with stylised flowers and foliage with line borders

Height: 6.5cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.149, item no. 151/152

Jarlets

A collection of blue and white jarlets circa 1725

Each with two figures conversing in the foreground by a promotory in a mountain lake, one showing a figure fishing from a sampan.

Height: 7.2cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.162, item no. 180

Small cosmetic boxes and covers

circa 1725

Each of circular form with flattened domed cover, the covers with a medallion of simple stylised flowers, the bowls with stylised lappet borders.

Diameter: 6.5cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.165, item no. 186/188

Seated boys

circa 1725

Wearing a blue-glazed short child's apron knotted around the waist, his hair drawn into one or two topknots.

Height: 8.5cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.187, item no. 253/254

Buddhist seated lions

Biscuit water-dropper figures of seated Buddhist lions, circa 1725

The yellow-glazed beasts seated on their haunches, a short spout beside their turned heads, their mane and tail splashed with green glaze.

Height: 6.8cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.217, item no. 325

Buddhist standing lions

Biscuit water-dropper figures of standing Buddhist lions, circa 1725

Standing four-square with heads turned and mouths open in a roar, their bodies glazed green and manes and tails picked out in brown.

Height: 7cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.217, item no. 327

Figures of a horse rider

Biscuit free-standing figures of a horse rider, circa 1725

In aubergine-glazed scholar's cap and green gown, riding side-saddle on a yellow-glazed horse.

Height: 10cm

Literature: The National Museum of Vietnamese History Catalogue 2002, p.215, item no. 321

Trevor Philip & Sons sold blue and white porcelain from the Vung Tau Shipwreck Cargo in 1992. The pieces of porcelain offered in this catalogue are examples from the Ca Mau Shipwreck, auctioned in Amsterdam in January 2007 by Sotheby's.

Trevor Philip & Sons Ltd, 75a Jermyn Street, St James's, London SW1Y 6NP England
• Tel: +44(0)20 7930 2954 • Mobile: 07900 883955 • Fax: +44(0)20 7321 0212
• E-mail: globe@trevorphilip.com • Website: www.trevorphilip.com

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